#8

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Medical
Observations,
made during a short period on the
Western coast of Africa,
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of
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It is not my intention, in the present paper, to indulge in speculation; but merely to give a faithful detail of such facts, as fell under my immediate observation, during a short cruise, on the Western coast of Africa, in the rainy season of 1824. As the same ground has been passed over by Lind, and other distinguished Surgeons of the British Navy; it can scarcely be supposed, with my limited experience that I should be competent to offer, to the consideration of the Faculty, any circumstance of importance, which has not been already spread before the profession, by those minute and faithful observers of nature.

That part of the coast, which lies between the Tropics, has, properly speaking, been divided into two seasons, the Wet, and the Dry. The former is the season of sickness;

Whereas, for many months in the Dry season, most parts of the coast are remarkably healthy and pleasant.

The Rains have been observed to follow the Sun, in his apparent progress along the coast, from the Southern to the Northern Tropic; and to return in his train, as he retrogrades to the South. They usually commence at Mesurada, (which is situated in 6 Degrees of Northern Latitude) in May; and thence, moving slowly onward, arrive at the Cape de Vera Islands, in the month of August: at which time, a remission takes place, at Mesurada, and other places near the Equator.

On the return of the Sun from his Northern tour, the rains recommence at those places, and after continuing for a time, pass over to the South of the Line. The quantity

of water which falls at night, is much greater than at any other period of the 24 hours. During the day, the intense heat of the Vertical Sun, enables the atmosphere, to support its immense load of Vapour, but as soon as its influence is withdrawn in the evening, the rain begins, and falls in torrents through the night.

The heat which we experienced while on the coast, did not exceed 79 degrees, which is much less, (according to common observation) than is indicated by the Thermometer, in the dry season of the year. It is stated by Lind, that at Senegal, (the most Northern extremity of Guinea) in December 1763, the Temperature was 93 degrees, measured by Fahrenheit's Thermometer, and 98 at Sierra Leona, when the Sun, had made its most distant retreat from those places,—

Hence we may in some measure foresee the influence of the rains, in protecting the already heated ground, from the perpendicular Rays of the returning Vertical Sun. — So general is the diffusion of the miasmata, throughout the atmosphere, in the rainy Season, that not only those persons, who are on Shore, but even the Crews of Ships, at the distance of some miles from land, feel its influence. — Nor is it confined in its effects to the Human species only; on the contrary, it extends its baneful influence, to many of the inferior orders of Animals. — I was informed by the resident agent of the Colonization Society, that most of the domestic Animals, which have been procured for the use of the Colony, at Mesurado, have fallen victims to the climate.

Strangers, who remain on shore, at this season of the year are variously affected; either with Dysentery, Fever & Ulcers is a more general derangement of all the functions of the body, when, at Lunda, at the little colony, established at Mehumma. I form the aspect of disease, strongly depicted in almost every face. None could be said, to be entirely well; except the Natives and a few others, whom time and uncommon strength of Constitution, had inured to the Climate. Such was the depressed state of the System that the slightest scratch or abrasion of the skin would speedily degenerate into a foul and malignant Ulcer. This African Ulcer always, commenced with an obstinate Hemorrhage, from its part, the full description it was characterized, by a circular shape, with elevated edges an as-

ulcerated surface, with incipient coagula of blood and becoming livid with heat and swelling of the adjacent parts. The local irritation then ceases and extends its influence to the general system, producing coincidentally febrile action as was indicated. On the other hand, it does not seem in a large number, together with a very great derangement of the digestive organs. - The inhabitants of the colony consider it an incurable disease, though I have of only one case in which it terminated fatally. In that instance, it attacked the stomach of an imperfectly developed man who seemed to come in a few days. - These cases of the disease which have continued for one or two years several of which came under my observation for their suitable character, and appear that of the man described by Mr. Stone,

as situated in parts, too weak to support a healthy action.

As to the treatment my experience enables me to say but little. The few cases that became under my care, in 1856 appeared to be aggravated by Cerates, and all oily applications. The use of Opium however in the form of a plaster to the heart has shown a most salutary influence. It not only alleviates the pain, but changes entirely the character of the disease action. The most efficacious remedy, however, was a change of climate.

As soon as we left the rains, and fell in with the trade winds on our passage to the West Indies the Albcas all disappeared, and we had no further trouble with them.

The disease most formidable to strangers, at this season of the year, is the Bilious Remittent Fever. It is always most

malignant at the beginning of the rains, and gradually abates in violence, as the season advances, and the constitution becomes accustomed to the climate – Of the cases of this disease which fell under my observation, three were most violent, which were contracted by imprudent exposure on shore; but of six persons who thus contracted the disease, two died and the other four narrowly escaped with life. –

When the disease occurred on board the vessel anchored at the distance of 5 miles from land, the attacks were milder, tho' by no means entirely free from danger.

The disease was, generally, preceded by a mild dysentery of several days duration –

In some cases however, it made its appearance, without any premonitory symptoms. – A remarkable instance of this kind

was furnished by the case of the gentleman who was sent by the Government of the United States, to enquire into the state of the colony at Mesurado. — In attending to the duties of his Mission, this Gentleman found it necessary to remain on shore, six or eight days. When he returned on board the vessel he was in the most perfect health, and continued so, until the eighth day, after our departure from the coast; when upon, descending hastily the cabin ladder, he made a false step and to my surprise notwithstanding the slight fall of the shock, he was immediately seized with a severe headache, followed in the course of a few hours, by the most violent febrile symptoms. — In another instance the attack came on more suddenly, in the form of an apoplectic fit. — To these enumerated cases, I may add; that whenever a strong predisposition

to Rheumatism excepta, the fever was for a time disguised under the character of that disease. —

I, though it may be a digression, yet it may not perhaps be altogether irrelevant, to mention here, a very singular circumstance, and one which I have had frequent opportunities of witnessing, on visiting an unhealthy Port; Namely, that, those persons, who were labouring under stricture of the Urethra, were very apt, to be seized with a complete suppression of Urine; so soon as we arrived at those places, where the atmosphere was much contaminated. This is a very curious Phenomenon, and illustrates two points; first the extensive influence, which the miasma exerts over the system, and secondly, the great tendency of diseased action, to spend its force, on the weakest part of the body.

The fever was generally ushered in, by a wide defined chill. When fully developed it was characterized by the following symptoms, a quick, full, and strong, pulse, hot skin, flush'd face, severe headache, furred tongue, slightly tinged with yellow, in the stomach, excessive thirst obstinate constipation, pain in the abdomen, one in the right side of the chest, sounds of the throat, cough, one the expectoration of thick viscid matter. The remissions were very irregular in their recurrence, generally however, they occured in the morning.

The respiration incident to this stage, was so profuse, as to be regarded among the most formidable circumstances attendant on the disease.

To the symptoms which have been already enumerated as characterizing this dis-

case; there were superadded, in one or two cases, several anomalous appearances. In one case there was an eruption of very irritable blotches, during the intermission, which was the cause of great inquietude to the patient. In another there was a severe pain in the Testicles, and in the progress of the case, the scrotum, contracted firmly, assumed a dark colour, and was marked with deep Rhagades in its surface.

If not checked by the remedial agents, employed for its removal, the disease in the course of three or four days, assumed a Typhoid character, when the skin, and eyes became yellow, the extremities cold, and the pulse small quick and feeble.

7. There were superadded, in several cases, the most alarming symptoms, such as, black tongue, coma, delirium, petechiæ, and involuntary discharges of Fæces and Urine. Generally

on the sixth or seventh day the disease came to a crisis, which was announced, in every instance, by an eruption of florid petechiæ.

It would appear from this circumstance, combined with several of the symptoms, mentioned, in the general character of the disease, that there must have been an inflammatory affection of the lungs, associated with the fever. This was owing, perhaps, to a strong miasmatic predisposition which existed at the time, it having been the prevailing disease on board the vessel, on reaching the coast; and soon after we left the rivers it relented and became intermittent.

The treatment of the early stage of this disease consisted principally in blood letting, and purging. In some instances there was venesection at once, to the amount of 20 or 30 ounces. This large bleeding usually effected all that

it cannot was capable of performing some indu-
ce stools was the tendency to syncope in most
instances. First it would have been highly
injudicious to repeat the operation. We there-
fore resorted to other modes of evacuation, far
more safe and perhaps more efficacious for the
further reduction of excitement and vascular
action. At the head of these, Emetics, stand
conspicuous. They were called for by many in-
dications and employed with no sparing hand.
We at first resorted to the most active articles,
such as Calomel, Gamboge and Jalap, in
minute doses of Combination and these were
assisted in their operation by the Cream Tar-
tar, or divided doses of Stone of the Mentrae
Salts, as also by injections, the best materials
for which were always ready at hand,
without the trouble of preparation. I allude
to common Sea Water, either immo-

-dially from the Ocean, and used pro re nata.

The bowels having been well evacuated, and the violence of the excitement sufficiently subdued; we had recourse, with much advantage, to some of the milder Diaphoretic medicines; such as the Sulphates Mindererii, or small doses of the Tartrate of Antimony, either alone, or in combination with Calomel, and Nitrate of Potassa.

The irritable state of the stomach in several cases was found to be a serious impediment to the administration of Medicines. To correct this, a variety of the usual remedies, were put in requisition. Nothing, however, made the least impression upon the symptoms, except a strong infusion of Virginia Snake Root. This, given in the dose of a wine glass full, and repeated, as often as the urgency of the symptoms, demanded, acted like

a cleanse, not only comprising the stomach, but extending the purging, perspiration, incident to the secretions. Unaided by the use of this invaluable medicine, we should have found ourselves totally incompetent, to the management of these cases.

Emetics were used in one or two instances, but as no good effect seemed to result they were abandoned.

Mercury, which has a high reputation, in the treatment of almost all, Tropical diseases, was seen called to our assistance: and from the liberal manner, in which it was used, we soon had several cases, under its full influence. Our highly wrought anticipations of success, from the employment of this potent medicine, were however, by no means realised, no case was improved by it, and some were evidently made worse, it was therefore thrown

aside, as not merely useless, but injurious.

After the use of the more direct depletory measures Blisters were employed with effect, in removing the severe pain in the side.

Bark was administered in a variety of forms; but no benefit resulted from its use, until the force of the disease was broken, and the patient accordingly convalescent.

There was nothing peculiar in the treatment of the second, or Typhoid stage of the disease. He generally commenced with the Carbonate of Ammonia, in the form of the Volatile Julep, and followed it up with Wine, Brandy, and other more powerful stimulants, as the urgency of the case demanded. —

Blisters to the head, and extremities, when the brain was much affected, were very efficacious. —

Convalescence was observed to be exceedingly slow — Long after the force of the disease was subdued, the patients continued in a lingering state of health. Most of them were affected with a pain in the right side, numbness of the inferior extremities, occasional swellings of the feet and ankles, and more or less derangement of the digestive Organs.

There was, in every instance, a very great susceptibility to morbid impressions. This was evinced so strongly, that I could by its means, test the purity of the atmosphere of the different places, we visited in the West Indian Islands; In proof of this remark, I may state, that, at the time, we arrived at the Island of Saint Thomas, the convalescents were walking about the deck, but we had not been in port, more than 24 hours before they were all confined to their

births, with symptoms of violent fever.—
The same thing occurred in the Havana, and again in Matanzas.—It was remarked in every instance, that the condition of the sick, was much improved after putting to sea.—

These lingering cases were found exceedingly difficult to manage, in the hot climate of the West Indies. Purging, antimonials, and mercury, proved alike ineffectual and a favorable opportunity presenting itself, the afflicted, were returned to the United States, under the impression, that a change of climate, might accomplish, that, which Medicine, had been found incompetent to effect.

This brings to a conclusion, the principal observations, which I have been able to make, on those diseases, which came under my immediate notice, on

the western coast of Africa.

Imperfect as they are, I submit them, to the enlightened wisdom of the Faculty.